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SBA Programs Contribute to West Virginia Veteran-owned Company's Growth

MORGANTOWN - For a little over a decade, Craig Hartzell has been looked to as a leader in the West Virginia technology movement. He's extremely proud of his company's accomplishments and successes, which he attributes to their involvement in the federal contracting arena.

Hartzell is Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Azimuth Incorporated, an electronics engineering, software engineering and logistics company with offices in Morgantown, Fairmont and Frederick Maryland.

Hartzell and partner Adam Macias, who met while serving together in the U.S. Army Special Forces, founded Azimuth in 1989. What began with one employee and annual sales of \$15K has grown to nearly 80 employees and annual sales exceeding \$7M.

"Through our military background, we knew there were not many West Virginia based engineering firms whose focus was the Department of Defense," said Hartzell. "We knew that with a little experience, and a lot of hard work, we could make it work."

It was about that time a few fortunate factors came into play. The first was the teaming with Electronic Warfare Associates (EWA), a large electronics and software engineering company based in Virginia and who had recently relocated to Fairmont. EWA "adopted" Azimuth and entered the pilot "mentor-protégé" program sponsored by the Department of Defense.

"The assistance we received from EWA was invaluable," said Hartzell. "In fact, we probably wouldn't be the company we are today without their influence and support. There's a lot to be learned from companies that have been down the road before."

Another factor that helped in the growth of Azimuth was the financial assistance they received from the U.S. Small Business Administration. "We're a 'hands-on' company and knew that in order for us to be successful and able to compete for large-scale government contracts, plant and equipment was crucial," added Hartzell.

Two SBA 7(a) guaranteed loans later, the company had the facility and equipment they needed. "In fact, most of the equipment that we purchased back in the early 90's with the SBA loans is still in use today," said Hartzell.

Azimuth found that getting a government-backed loan wasn't difficult. "The loan process was fairly quick and easy," said Hartzell. "The lender we used was very knowledgeable about the SBA loan process and quickly

dealt with any questions and concerns we had. We also found the people at SBA very helpful and supportive as well.”

Another reason that contributed to Azimuth’s growth was their participation in SBA’s 8(a) business development program. The 8(a) program was created to help disadvantaged businesses compete in the American economy and gain a foothold in obtaining federal contracts.

“I believe that we are an example of exactly what the 8(a) program was designed to do,” said Hartzell. “We didn’t rely on the program for our survival. The knowledge and tools we obtained while participating in the program provided us with the capability of becoming a very solid firm at the end of the nine year program. The program assisted us with access to the right customers and enabled us to build our technical capabilities.”

Hartzell is also quick to realize that without the vision and support of West Virginia’s Congressional and Senate delegation, Azimuth wouldn’t be a player in what is now called the I-79 high technology corridor.

“The West Virginia business community is fortunate to have the support of visionaries like Senator Byrd, Senator Rockefeller and Congressman Mollohan. They’ve provided the groundwork for the development of the I-79 high technology corridor and we at Azimuth are proud to be part of the movement,” said Hartzell.

Hartzell has lots of stories and experiences he’s gathered over the years, but due to the nature of their work, most of them are classified. “In fact, some of our best work will never be shown or known,” added Hartzell.

Advocating for the rights of veterans is also one of Hartzell’s passions. In fact, he was nominated by Senator Rockefeller and appointed by the President of the United States to serve on the board of directors of the National Veterans Business Development Corporation, a position he still proudly holds. He’s also been involved in the development of numerous veterans’ conferences and offers support for West Virginia veteran-owned businesses.

Azimuth is known as a “little company” that isn’t afraid to stick out its neck to provide assistance to other companies that are looking to gain an insight into the world of government contracting.

“We’ve always been a strong advocate of the teaming concept,” said Hartzell. “It’s teaming that has gotten Azimuth to the point we are today and hopefully by continuing to utilize teaming, we can contribute to the development and success of other West Virginia firms.”

You know, he just might have something there.

For additional information on the SBA and its programs, visit the West Virginia District Office web site at www.sba.gov/wv or contact them at (304) 623-5631.

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